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The FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force Officer

By BRIG BARKER, M.J.A., and STEVE FOWLER

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During his briefing, the case agent provided details of the operational plan.[1] "We intend to arrest 12 people in this nationwide sweep. Task force members in different time zones will execute warrants simultaneously. The FISA coverage will remain in place until we have all subjects in custody." He went on to cover individual duty assignments, surveillance operations, and interview and interrogation strategies.

Next, the FBI assistant special agent in charge spoke to the roomful of investigators. "Tomorrow, you will disrupt a major terrorist cell that has homegrown roots. Because of your efforts, citizens across the country will be safer, and people radicalized through recruitment in prisons will think twice before planning attacks in this community. Good luck."

What may appear to be a standard FBI counterterrorism operation actually is quite different. The case agent running this complex multiple-subject investigation is a local detective assigned to the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) who has spent 2 years as a task force officer (TFO). Not only did he manage the 1-year investigation but he now will lead the overall disruption plan that most likely will have implications all over the globe. The detective's chief attended monthly investigative briefings at the FBI office, and eight other officers

from his department will take part in the planned disruption activities the next day. This is the new counterterrorism world where sharing of information goes deep and often involves significant participation from both state and local agencies.

Special Agent Barker is assigned to the FBI's Tulsa, Oklahoma, office.

Officer Fowler of the Vallejo, California, Police Department is assigned to the joint terrorism task force of the FBI's Sacramento, California, office.

History of JTTFs

The JTTF concept started in 1979 when the New York City Police Department recognized the value of integrating agencies at multiple levels to defeat an ever-increasing number of bank robberies. From there, JTTFs began playing an important role in thwarting terrorist activities and disrupting potential attacks domestically. From the beginning, the concept has remained simple: to establish a close-knit unit able to handle the numerous complexities inherent in a counterterrorism investigation.[2] JTTFs continue to mesh the benefits each agency can provide in a conglomerate task force setting.

Today, the JTTF's mission is to "investigate acts of terrorism that affect the U.S., its interests, property and citizens, including those employed by the U.S. and military personnel overseas."[3] JTTFs now exist in more than 100 cities nationwide, with one in each of the FBI's 56 field offices. Throughout the country, they consist of over 3,600 personnel, of which approximately 59 percent are special agents, 24 percent are state and local law enforcement officers, and 17 percent are professionals from other government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, and Department of Defense.[4]

State and local agencies have a significant presence on the JTTFs. From the outset, officers use and further develop their knowledge of investigative techniques, report writing, counterterrorism and national security matters, and the federal prosecutorial system. They continue to progress as they practice what they have learned. Some JTTFs assign seasoned FBI special agents to work with new TFOs, overseeing their paperwork and case management. As they gain experience, TFOs work more autonomously, eventually making strategic counterterrorism case decisions on their own.

Beneficial Partnership

Multiple agencies working together increase dialogue, improve relationships, and maximize information sharing. In fact, a report by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, found that 77 percent of JTTF members rated "information sharing at meetings" as good to excellent.[5] Given a new sense of collaboration, JTTFs can have a substantial impact on the war on terror. They have proven successful in thwarting numerous terrorist plots in the United States and providing an effective venue for local officers to assist in the mission of national security.

The FBI benefits from having officers assigned to JTTFs. Its efforts are enhanced by additional personnel with street-level experience and knowledge of local jurisdictions.

Police departments also benefit from having an officer assigned to a JTTF. TFOs often undergo extensive specialized training, gain additional investigative experience, and manage complex JTTF investigations during their tenure. In addition, they have other opportunities for professional development through temporary assignments to FBI Headquarters and overseas duties. Eventually, they gain full clearances and receive U.S. Marshall special deputization.

Typical Day for a TFO

During any day on the job, officers may confront unique challenges. Other times, however, they will face a fairly routine schedule.

8:15 a.m.

The TFO arrives at the FBI office.

9 a.m.

The officer meets with the FBI supervisor regarding a local al Qaeda investigation in which the TFO is the primary case agent. The officer advises the supervisor that he and an FBI special agent will interview a potential informant at 1 p.m. The supervisor advises that he sees other international terrorism cases in the area related to the investigation and that an informant would be helpful in discerning the significance of the connections.

11 a.m.

The TFO reviews evidence from a recent search warrant and discovers a picture of a known affiliate of a terrorist currently in custody in another country. He sets a lead to an FBI office overseas regarding potential travel through Egypt by the subject.

> ***"The assignment of an officer to the JTTF proves beneficial to both the FBI and the police agency."***

12:30 p.m.

The officer meets with the assisting FBI special agent in preparation for the 1 p.m interview. They talk about approaches and follow-up options.

1 p.m.

The TFO and the agent meet with the potential informant. The individual advises them that he is meeting the next day with three people that he believes are involved in illegal drug activity. They request the person's cooperation, and he agrees.

2:30 p.m.

The officer writes a report on the meeting and attaches appropriate paperwork to request having the informant monitor tomorrow's meeting with the individuals. The TFO contacts his department's dispatch and advises of the anticipated presence of JTTF personnel in the vicinity of the informant's meeting.

3:30 p.m.

The TFO attends a weekly squad meeting wherein personnel provide briefings regarding significant investigations. The officer requests and receives the assistance of three other agents for the source's meeting the next day.

5 p.m.

The officer conducts a drive-by surveillance of a terrorism subject's residence and notes the license plate of a new vehicle parked in the driveway. The TFO provides the information to dispatch.

Of course, TFOs have other taskings, duties, and assistance requirements while on the JTTF. During a crisis situation, they will work long hours, conduct numerous surveillances, and attend many meetings.

To perform these duties, TFOs often receive access to a government-issued vehicle and other necessary equipment.

Departmental Considerations

Because the JTTF TFO represents the department, police agencies should carefully evaluate who they assign. Historically, departments have sent their most competent officers. Doing so greatly enhances the JTTF, as well as the safety of the public. When making this important decision, agencies should consider several questions.

- Does the benefit of the officer's departure from the department outweigh the cost?
- Should the individual serve on a full- or part-time basis? In the latter case, a lack of continuity and "face time" at the JTTF can present problems. Often, the case work moves fast, and those that work together become close-knit.
- Will the officer have any difficulty obtaining a clearance? And, if not, the department probably will benefit from having a member of the command staff secure one.
- How much potential terrorist activity currently takes place in the department's jurisdiction? Sometimes, the agency learns this only after someone in its command staff has obtained a clearance.
- Is this particular officer the best fit for the assignment?

Overall, these considerations serve only as guidance. The department probably would benefit from an in-person meeting with the local JTTF supervisor. This individual would be the officer's frontline manager and could answer many questions about the JTTF.

Transition to the New Assignment

TFOs often go through phases while adjusting to the new assignment. They will find that international terrorism cases involve paperwork and report writing similar to that encountered in police work, but will notice a higher volume because of the global nature of the investigative activities and the exponential increase of information sharing within the intelligence community. Nevertheless, officers should successfully transition with some mentoring.

During the transition phase, typically about 1 year, TFOs will undergo background checks (unless already completed) and a counterintelligence-focused polygraph examination. As they become more involved in investigations, they will receive increasingly open access to the FBI facility with appropriately issued security badges, beginning with temporary ones at the

outset. Initially, they may work domestic terrorism cases that do not require the security clearances necessary for international terrorism investigations. Upon receiving their clearances, officers will gain full access, similar to that of any other JTTF agent, to all cases.

Conclusion

The assignment of an officer to the JTTF proves beneficial to both the FBI and the police agency. The department has a real-time representative involved in the local war on terror, while the FBI has an officer with street-level experience involved in thwarting local terrorist cells within the community. As a result, both parties more effectively can achieve their goal: detecting and disrupting terrorist networks in a given community, thus keeping the citizens they serve safe. ✦

Endnotes

[1] For illustrative purposes and to maintain clarity, the authors employ masculine pronouns in examples throughout the article.

[2] Robert Martin, "The Joint Terrorism Task Force: A Concept That Works," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 1999, 23-27.

[3] *http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/nd/homelandsecurity/homelandsec_jttf.html*

[4] FBI National Academy course, "Counterterrorism Strategies: Understanding and Responding to the Threat."

[5] *http://www.usdoj.gov/oig/reports/plus/e0507/results.htm*

FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin Author Guidelines

Length: Manuscripts should contain 2,000 to 3,500 words (8 to 14 pages, double-spaced) for feature articles and 1,200 to 2,000 words (5 to 8 pages, double-spaced) for specialized departments, such as Police Practice.

Format: Authors should submit three copies of their articles typed and double-spaced on 8 ½- by 11-inch white paper with all pages numbered, along with an electronic version saved on computer disk, or e-mail them.

Criteria: The *Bulletin* judges articles on relevance to the audience, factual accuracy, analysis of the information, structure and logical flow, style and ease of reading, and length. It generally does not publish articles on similar topics within a 12-month period or accept those previously published or currently under consideration by other magazines. Because it is a government publication, the *Bulletin* cannot accept articles that advertise a product or service. To ensure that their writing style meets the *Bulletin's* requirements, authors should study several issues of the magazine and contact the staff or access *http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/leb.htm* for the expanded author guidelines, which contain additional specifications, detailed examples, and effective writing techniques. The *Bulletin* will advise authors of acceptance or rejection but cannot guarantee a publication date for accepted articles, which the staff edits for length, clarity, format, and style.

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